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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewers

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INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE PETRO

INTERVIEWER: MIKE PETRO

M.Petro: This is an interview with George Petro for the Oral History Project by Mike Petro at the location of 514 Cowles on the 22nd day of May at six o' clock in the evening.

M.Petro: When you first moved to Joliet what was your job?

G.Petro: I came here to start at a steel mill for Phoenix Manufacturing Company.

M.Petro: Where is Phoenix located?

G.Petro: On Industry Avenue.

M.Petro: Is that Broadway?

G.Petro: Off Broadway on Industry Avenue.

M.Petro: What was your job there when you first came?

G.Petro: I was supposed to be a Roller... I was the Roller there at Phoenix Manufacturing Company starting up the mill.

M.Petro: What type of wages did you make when you first came here?

G.Petro: About \$700 a month.

M.Petro: \$700 a month. Was that much above the typical wage at that time?

G.Petro: It was a little bit above.

M.Petro: Were there any union wages set up at that time?

G.Petro: Not at that time, no.





M.Petro: When was that, 1954?

G.Petro: Well, we didn't have the steel mill union until three or four years later in the steel mill down at Phoenix.

M.Petro: When was that? Roughly around 1957?

G.Petro: Somewhere in that neighborhood.

M.Petro: When did the unions become relatively strong as they are today?

G.Petro: Phoenix's wasn't strong until I'd say about ten years ago:

M.Petro: What caused them to get stronger? Was it their need for better working conditions?

G.Petro: There was a need for better working conditions and the other unions throughout the country were stronger so they went along with the father union.

M.Petro: What was the steel mill like when you moved here?

G.Petro: All they made there was horseshoes at the time.

M.Petro: Where did they supply the horseshoes to?

G.Petro: All over the world.

M.Petro: OK, so it was a world-renowed horseshoe palnt?

G.Petro: That's right.

M.Petro: When did they change over or stop making horseshoes?

G.Petro: They stopped making horseshoes at Phoenix about 1965.

M.Petro: Why did they stop making horseshoes?



G.Petro: Well, the demand wasn't so great because the farmers are all using mechanized equipment and about the only horseshoes used now are race horseshoes. That's about the main thing for horseshoes around the United States.

M.Petro: Was there any common work laws set up like how many hours a week you could work then?

G.Petro: Not at that time, but now they have work laws set up so that you can only work so many hours a week. At the time that I started here at Phoenix, you could work as many hours of the day that was possible for you to work.

M.Petro: So there was no minimum amount of time you had to put in, right?

G.Petro: No, if you needed the work, you could keep on working.

M.Petro: OK. Here in Joliet what were the prices like for gas and things?

G.Petro: Down around thirty cents a gallon, somewhere in that neighborhood.

M.Petro: What did you pay for a normal week's amount of food?

G.Petro: Oh, a week's amount of food you could get by in the neighborhood around \$15-\$20 a week.

M.Petro: How much do you have to spend today roughly for your food?

G.Petro: It runs in the neighborhood of about \$50 a week.

M.Petro: So there's quite an increase?





G.Petro: Quite an increase.

M.Petro: When you moved here was the town very much as it is today or has it changed quite a bit?

G.Petro: Well, there wasn't hardly anything on the west side, a little on the west side but mostly farm land. But in the past ten years it has grown by leaps and bounds. I'd say it increased 100% on the west side.

M.Petro: What was the downtown like?

G.Petro: Downtown was a nice area at that time. The shopping center has taken over and now the downtown is going downhill. Also, on account of, I think, parking facilities and one thing or another.

M.Petro: Was Jefferson Street very busy? Was it black top and was it four lane?

G.Petro: Jefferson Street wasn't too busy, but now it's a main thoroughfare and it's really busy today.

M.Petro: Where were businesses there when you moved here?

G.Petro: There wasn't hardly anything on the west side.

M.Petro: When did the businesses really start to move up to the west side?

G.Petro: During the last 10-15 years is when it really started moving and booming.

M.Petro: I suppose there weren't many homes here when you moved here either?

G.Petro: They were started. There wasn't too many. Over in Crest Hill there was a few. I'd say in the last 10-15



years is when it's really booming 100%.

M.Petro: Were there very many homes around when you moved to theis area?

G.Petro: Well, in this area where we're located now there was...homes in this block were built up but mostly old homes with an exception of about a half dozen.

M.Petro: When did you move to your present address?

G.Petro: 1958.

M.Petro: Can you remember some of the prices of property in this area when you first moved here or even before that?

G.Petro: They ranged anywhere from \$15,000 to \$25,000.

Today the same homes are worth about \$35-40,000.

M.Petro: What was it like in this area with respect to the economy at that time? Was Joliet a really booming economy with the industry here or was it sort of stagnant?

G.Petro: No, it was pretty well.

M.Petro: When you were working in the steel mill, how much has the steel indusrty in the Joliet area progressed, very much?

G.Petro: Well, all I can speak is about the Phoenix Manufacturing Company. It came from a horseshoe up to the running mill at the present day and they're still increasing down there. I would say it's increased production about 60-70% since we started.

M.Petro: What was it like making steel then in comparision with now?





G.Petro: They make steel a lot faster today than they did in those days. New methods and one thing or another and they say the quality is better.

M.Petro: How do they go about it today?

G.Petro: I have no idea what process it goes through today, but as far as the running goes, it's the same routine as years ago, only thing, it's speeded up the mills and increased production.

M.Petro: When you were up at the steel mill were most of the people in the mill all average middle class people or were they low class?

G.Petro: It was just a common run of the mill people, low class people and middle class people.

M.Petro: Did Joliet have many executive positions or was most of it types of carpenters and plumbers, stuff like that?

G.Petro: They had a few, not like they have today, because the city is growing by leaps and bounds.

M.Petro: So you fell Joliet has progressed a little bit?

G.Petro: Joliet has progressed in all phases I would say. I wouldn't know, about 75% in comparison to what it was years ago, I would say.

M.Petro: Do you think all Joliet has progressed as well as it should have with all the big other cities around?

G.Petro: I think it has.



M.Petro: Most people complain in Joliet that it's behind its time like with street lights and the streets and the method of the bridges. Do you feel they're a little bit out of date?

G.Petro: No, I do not feel that it's out of date. That all takes time to overcome all that. Eventually, they'll probably have overhead bridges where they have all these draw bridges and so forth today.

M.Petro: Don't you feel it would be a little bit better if they had them now instead of the future?

G.Petro: No, because that all takes money, and it takes a lot of money to run a city.

M.Petro: When you first moved here who was the mayor at that time? Can you remember offhand? Was it Jahneke?

G.Petro: Jahneke was there, and what the heck was the fellows name that followed...

M.Petro: Hennesy?

G.Petro: Hennesy. That's the only two mayors I know besides the present mayor.

M.Petro: Well, let's see here...do you feel that since you've moved here that this present area had declined or increased in its...

G.Petro: This present area where we are living at the present time has increased in value. It hasn't declined whatsoever.

M.Petro: When you first came to Joliet did you live at the present address here?





G.Petro: Same address.

M.Petro: I see. What shape were the businesses in when you came to Joliet? Were they dragging or were they just starting to pick up?

G.Petro: Well, I think they were moving along at a pretty good percentage.

M.Petro: Could you elaborate a little bit upon the working conditions in the steel mill when you first moved here as what they are now.

G.Petro: Well, the working conditions in the steel mill is about 50% better than what it was years ago.

M.Petro: What were some of the conditoons? Did they always have lights and water and things?

G.Petro: We didn't have washroom facilities like they have today and you didn't have no machimes that you could get yourself a cup of coffee or a soda or a milk like what you have today.

M.Petro: Was the first aid as good as it is now?

G.Petro: First aid you have today. Years ago if you go hurt or anything they had to take you in a ambulance down to the hospital or else the doctors office. Today you have first aid right in the mill. You have your nurses and so forth right in the mill to take care of you.

M.Petro: Were the streets in Joliet in fair condition?

G.Petro: The streets in Joliet, I would say, has improved drastically.



M.PETRO: In other words, they were in pretty poor shape when you first moved here?

G.PETRO: That's right. There were ruts and holes in them and I think they have been improved a great deal.

M.PETRO: Just one final question I've got here. Do you feel that Joliet as a whole is on an increase at the present date or do you feel it's on the decline?

G.PETRO: No, I don't believe it's on the decline. I think it's holding its own as much as any other city this size.

M.PETRO: In other words, you wouldn't feel that its increasing in value either?

G.PETRO: Oh yes, it's increased in value in comparison to other cities of this size. I would say a few other cities that I've been in, like well say Gary, Indiana; I was over there and used to live there years ago. I would say that Joliet has outstripped Gary a hundred to one in improvements.

M.PETRO: When you lived in Gary were some of the same things you saw in Joliet better or worse? Were there lights in the streets?

G.PETRO: At that time I would say that Gary was ahead of Joliet in all phases, but it's really declined in the last 10-15 years.

M.PETRO: When you worked in Gary were the steel mills much different there than they are here?



G.PETRO: They were more modern in Gary than they are here, but now they are making them modern here, or just as modern here as they are anywhere in the country.

M.PETRO: You were brought here from what steel company?

G.PETRO: Inland Steel.

M.PETRO: So you were brought from Inland Steel to start Phoenix Manufacturing Company?

G.PETRO: That is right.

M.PETRO: You said in our previous interview that you came to Joliet one time when you were a young boy. How long ago was that?

G.PETRO: Back around 1925-26.

M.PETRO: Well, what did you do when you came to Joliet?

G.PETRO: All I did, I got a job as a huckster delivering groceries, fruit and vegetables to stores on Collins Street. I don't remember much about Joliet because I wasn't too interested in it and only passing through more or less.

M.PETRO: How long did you stay in Joliet?

G.PETRO: Probably three, four weeks---something like that. I remember West Jefferson Street way out west was all dirt road and Route 6 was practically dirt road. And that's about all I know about Joliet at that time. I know there was a steel mill here, but I was too young to go to work in a steel mill.

M.PETRO: Was there anything on the west side then?

G.PETRO: No, not too much on the west side then hardly anything.

M.PETRO: Was the downtown . . . were the streets all paved?

G.PETRO: Downtown was paved, had lights. To me it was a





great big city at that time. That's about the extent of it. Joliet had a steel mill here and had a lot of open hearths in it and one thing or another. Then when they started building Gary, it became the steel making center of the country or the midwest here. In later years they took all the open heraths out and now they don't have no open heraths or anything like that, so it makes it a lot cleaner city.

M.PETRO: When you came here did you fish or anything?

G.PETRO: Oh, yes, I did a little bit of fishing and they were a lot better berause the water was a lot cleaner than what it is today and the hunting was terrific down on all the rivers. You had nothing but farm land all through here and the farmers didn't object to you doing any hunting Today you don't have near the hunting you had then, because places are being built up and you are not allowed to do a lot. You get a few rabbits and stuff like that around here now that's about it. Most of the hunting was done around the little town of Minooka. And I recall one time I shot a rabbit, it was quite a ways away, and there was only one bee-bee that happened to hit him in the head. He turned over and sat up and I thought the thing was still alive. I go over there and he is just as dead as could be. That was one of the fascinating things about my hunting experiences around here. And there were a few phesents around here at the time, too.

M.PETRO: When you first came here to Joliet when you were younger, were there very many cars around here, Joliet, or was it mostly horse and buggy?



G.PETRO: No, it was mostly horse and buggy. There were a few cars around. Because the car industry just started to perk up a little bit at that itme, I recall it was about 1914. There was a lot of different makes of cars than there were today. And then Henry Ford came out with his Ford. Chevy was out on the market, then they were sold to the General Shippers and then sold to General Motors, but Ford maintained his plant.

M.PETRO: Were there any car dealers in Joliet at that time?

G.PETRO: Now that I don't know. I suppose there were. I didn't look for a car because I couldn't afford to buy one anyway.

M.PETRO: How much was a car back then?

G.PETRO: Oh I don't know, about four or \$500.

M.PETRO: Was that a lot of money to save up for a car?

G.PETRO: Well, I thought it was because you didn't make that kind of money.

M.PETRO: When you first came here what were the kinds of wages that you made when you were young?

G.PETRO: All they paid me at that time was about \$15 a month and room and board so I only stayed a couple weeks.

M.Petro: What year was that again?

G.Petro: What year was that? Back in '24 '25 I don't exactly remember the dates. Wages were very small in comparison to what they are today. I worked fo a month for what for what they do for one hour today.

M.PETRO: Wasn't it said that a long time ago a lot of people would work for \$10 a month and pretty close to today you're making \$10 a hour.





G.PETRO: That's right. I'd work for \$10 a month, \$15 a month.

M.PETRO: Were you living around this area when the depression hit?

G.PETRO: NO, I lived around Gary when the depression hit.

M.PETRO: What was it like during the depression?

G.PETRO? Well, industries went down and then when Roosevelt became president he started a program what they called the NRA and put a lot of people to work on the roads and one thing or another to help them out. The depression lasted from about 1929 till it started breaking about 1933. Things from then on got better till the present day. But I mean I remember working in the steel mill for \$3.88 for eight hours. That was during the depression.

M.PETRO: Well OK then, thank you very much. This concludes the interview with George Petro on the subject of Oral History for Joliet Junior College. Thank you.



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